The Report Committee for Matthew Joseph Cronin
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following Report

Dwelling

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Dan Sutherland, Supervisor

Sarah Canright

Dwelling

by

Matthew Joseph Cronin

Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Art

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2019

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee, Alexander Birchler, Sarah Canright, Dan Sutherland, as well as my committee chair, Teresa Hubbard. Additionally, I would like to thank all other faculty who served on my committee throughout my time at the University of Texas at Austin, Troy Brauntuch, Anna Collette, and Bogdan Perzyński. It was a privilege to work with all of you and I am eternally grateful for insight that you brought to my practice.

Abstract

Dwelling

Matthew Joseph Cronin, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2019

Supervisor: Dan Sutherland

This report outlines the conceptual and formal development of a singular body of work produced during my final year of graduate studies at the University of Texas at Austin. *Dwelling,* the series from which this report takes its name, is a collection of large-scale photographs that reimagines the domestic space through the re-working of preexisting imagery. Throughout the pages that follow, I highlight key elements that make up the conceptual framework that support the visual language of the pictures.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Disruption of Comfort

Figure 1: Lattice #1, Archival Inkjet Print, 60 x 75 inches, 2018

The photograph *Lattice #1* depicts a corner of an anonymous bedroom. At first glance this seems to be a standard American interior, albeit outdated. The bed is seen from three-quarters view and occupies the bottom-left third of the frame. As the eye travels from the lower left corner, along the sharp fold of the floral bedspread, it arrives at a glass nightstand. Arranged on the surface of the bedside table are several cubes that appear to be manufactured from glass. Also placed on the table is a ceramic vase that holds a large, dark floral arrangement which is punctuated with pale rosebuds. Emerging from behind the flowers is a rippled lampshade. Its

fabric dappled with light that originates from beyond the lattice on its right; the source unknown and unseen.

The pattern of light that falls onto the lampshade mimics the negative space of the lattice itself. Each row of bright, spotted light directs the eye of the viewer from the upper-center down to the lower-right corner of the frame. Further examination of the lampshade and the bright light that falls on its surface reveals an interesting and unexpected shift. Not only does the light appear to illuminate the lighting fixture's diffusing shade, but it seems to puncture it entirely; revealing the white brick wall behind it. Closer inspection of the fabric shade reveals that brick's punctuation is not limited to the areas touched by the lattice light, but segments of the wall are visible throughout the entire shade. It also becomes clear that the wall is not cutting through to reveal itself, but rather the lampshade and wall are merging into one.

From there, one can follow a standalone metal and glass shelf that runs vertically along the right edge of the photograph. On the highest shelf, in the top right corner of the frame is a partially visible plant; the silhouette of the plant growing darker as it approaches the image's edge. Below the potted plant, there is a translucent glass jug, the lattice pattern still visible throughout the container.

The transformations occurring in this photograph are strongest when accompanied by direct illumination. The main light source is not shown within the frame. It is implied that the source originates from beyond the lattice, outside of the room. The mutations in the foreground of the image (in the lower left corner) are more subtle than those occurring in the immediate path of light. The lattice is the point within the photograph that is closest to the light and most in its path, and it is the site of the most transformation. Its surface is adorned with a floral wallpaper and small cyan dots. However, at close view the structure of the lattice is compromised. The

checker box pattern of negative and positive space creates a grid that is self-generating and misregistered. This troubling of space makes it difficult to read which parts of the lattice structure are solid which are empty sections of its grid.

Furthest away from the light, in the lower left corner of the image, are the sheets of the bed, draped over the edge of the mattress. The folded under sheet is observed quietly blending into the comforter that sits atop it. As the light enters the room, rakes across the space, it changes and transforms what is in its path, disrupting the perceived comfort of domestic space.

Tradition as Comfort

Comfort and domestic wellbeing are fundamental human needs. When these basic needs are not met within the home, they are sought out in other forms. Often within the constructs of tradition. Traditions are a set of practices, often ritualistic or symbolic in nature, that are passed down through generations. They are governed by accepted norms and values within a culture, and through repetition preserve continuity with the past. When no such tradition is readily available, one is often created often as a response to novel situations that take the form of familiar circumstances in order to establish their own illusionary historical continuity. The connection to the past is established through a quasi-obligatory repetition of accepted responses.[1]

Traditions offer consistency in a world that is increasingly characterized by instability and change. The awareness of tradition is a modern concern that reflects the desire for such consistency. However, invented traditions which suggest unbroken continuity with the past yet

[1] Hobsbawm, E. J., and T. O. Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press, 2017., pp. 12.

are largely fabricated.[2] When manifested in the home, these traditions, real or invented, become visible within furniture and décor. For example, Early American or Colonial furniture rose to popularity during the first Centennial celebrations. It was meant to represent a direct link to the Founding Fathers. However, such furniture was not present during the American Revolution.

Like most invented traditions, it was more so a reflection of contemporary times than it is a direct link to the period it evoked. While the Centennial was partly responsible for the revival, it also paralleled a dramatic increase in non-British immigrants to the United States. Early American furniture served as a form of cultural authentification that enabled the established middle class to separate themselves from the new arrivals. [3]

My images use ideas of comfort that stem from familiar representations of the suburban home. The comfort initially suggested by my pictures is rooted in popular representations of the American home. The dated interiors are recognizable as relics of the 1970's, yet the domestic realm still resonates with contemporary anxieties. When a light is shined (literally and metaphorically) onto these perpetrators of comfort the stability of tradition is challenged and restlessness beneath the surface slowly becomes visible.

Spatial Dis-ease

Todd Haynes' 1995 film *Safe,* set in 1980's Los Angeles, follows Carol White as she develops an increasingly severe environmental allergy. Carol, portrayed by Julianne Moore, is a housewife living in an upper-middle class home in the San Fernando Valley who suddenly falls ill with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity. Her immune system is under attack by the toxic

[2] Rybczynski, Witold. *Home: a Short History of an Idea*. Pocket Books, 2001. Pp. 10

[3] Ibid

chemicals of the everyday such as hairspray, car exhaust, and fumes. As the film progresses her reactions grow worse. Carol's inability to manage the condition drives her into isolation first from her family, and ultimately from society as she retreats to a porcelain chamber in the New Mexico desert. Additionally, her condition drives her mental isolation as those around her (men) continuously question the validity of her symptoms. To them this is nothing more than a modern hysteria.

Like the response of Carol's immune system, the photographs that comprise *Dwelling* are a reaction to external circumstances. The shifts and transformations within the pictures are akin to allergic reactions suffered by Carol in the film. There is a scene that takes place during a Multiple Chemical Sensitivity information session where the leader of the session describes how the disease works. She speaks about how every individual is sensitive to common chemicals, but some are less able to tolerate the stress. The amount of chemically induced stress that one can tolerate before having a reaction is referred to as a maximum load. Much like Carol, the rooms within my photographs have reached their maximum load.

Disease comes from *dis,* meaning "the contrary of," and the *ease,* from the French *aise.* Its plural, *les aiese,* refers to a general sense of comfort. Before its use in relation to physical or psychological wellbeing, dis-ease referred to being uncomfortable.[4] In English, the word *comfort* comes from the French *confort,* which initially referred to moral or psychological comfort. At one time, feeling well was associated with a moral meaning. During the eighteenth century it acquired its current meaning which implicated material and technological impact on physical "well-being"[5]

[4] Te Teyssot, Georges, and Catherine Seavitt. "Boredom and Bedroom: The Suppression of the Habitual." *Assemblage*, no. 30, 1996, p. 44., doi:10.2307/3171457. pp. 45–61
[5] Ibid

In *Boredom and Bedroom: The Suppression of the Habitual,* Georges Teyssot asks the question, “Are there diseases or maladies that belong particularly to houses and apartments”? As he answers that question, he establishes two categories. One for diseases of time and one for diseases of space. Among the lists are anxiety and nostalgia, which are temporal maladies, as well as uncanniness, which is spatial.

Throughout *Dwelling,* there are numerous examples of such dis-ease at work. In the image *Arrangement,* a temporal disjunction emerges in the form of mismatched shadows and dissolving objects. Central to the composition is a bouquet of dry flowers. The flowers appear to be dead and fragile. However, the shadow cast on the wall is lush, as if it was made of flowing roses. Within a single image the object and shadow allude to multiple moments in time. One where the future seems full of promise. And one of the present, where that promised failed to materialize.

Arrangement lends itself to hauntological interpretation. Hauntology is the feeling of time out of sync. The past and future haunt over the present. Critic Mark Fisher states, “The future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production.” What hauntology mourns, he continues, “is less the failure of a future to transpire- the future as actuality- than the disappearance of this effective virtuality.” In *Arrangement* this is symbolized by the ghostly bouquet that washes over the dry fragile one.

Figure 2: Arrangement, Archival Inkjet Print, 60 x 75 inches, 2019

A hauntological interpretation of the photograph evokes a sense of nostalgia. Although it longs for the past, it does not actually hold affection for the past. It mourns the loss of the possible futures that once seemed possible but are no longer viable. This is suggested by the ghostly shadow of a once bountiful bouquet but is solidified by the slow disappearance of other objects within the frame. It is important to remember that while the image mourns the loss of the future by recreating elements of the past, it does not condone all aspects of the past. Even with all of the regressive associations that one may align with such time periods they still presented

themselves as hopeful for a radical and progressive future. Something that seems to be missing from the present.

Dwelling becomes two-fold within my work, no longer solely referencing the realm of the domestic. While the word *dwelling,* which this series is tiled, refers to a home, apartment, or other places of residence, the word is also defined as a long-standing focus or obsession with a singular subject in a manner that produces anxiety. Mark Fisher's writings on hauntology stem from his larger theory of Capitalist Realism, in which he argues that we exist in a perpetual present. An idea which builds on Francis Fukuyama's claim that history has ended. Under Capitalist Realism, the present obsesses over the past, continuously recreating it through pastiche and revivalism, a point similarly echoed in Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.*[6]

[6] "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?, By Mark Fisher, Zero Books, 2010, pp. 7

Figure 3: Lattice #2, Archival Inkjet Print, 60 x 75 inches, 2018

In addition to creating dis-ease through temporal maladies, I also disrupt comfort through spatial manipulations. *Lattice #2* provides the ideal example. This particular photograph can be thought of as a companion piece to *Lattice #1*. It purports to show an alternate view of the same room shown in #1. It prominently features the same lattice, bedspread, and house plants visible in the other image. Although similar, there are a number of differences that complicate the

relationship to its companion. Because of this #2 feels overly familiar, especially when viewed alongside #1. The manipulation of space results in an uncanny image.

Figure 4: Installation View, Lattice #1 & #2, Two Framed Archival Inkjet Prints Mounted to Dibond, Each 60 x 75 inches, 2019

Realizing the various forms of manipulation occurs slowly throughout the viewing process. Typically, one initially perceives photographs as faithful renderings of space. However, the facade breaks as the viewer dives deeper into the image revealing a new, more complicated psychological space.

The Undulating Room

Every photograph from *Dwelling* is a renegotiation of space. New, speculative interiors are created through a process of laying photographs of different bedrooms on top of one another

and montaging them into a single image. The disparate images come together in a way that approximates continuity yet threatens to come apart at the seams.

In film photography, light leaves its traces on the emulsion, imprinting a transparent reproduction of reality. However, this reproduction is not as faithful to the real as it purports to be. What is photographed is cropped and removed from a larger context. Or, in some cases the subjects are staged. Photography is a manipulation of two worlds, one before the lens and one inside the camera. Rather than represent the world, it produces one anew.[7]

Figure 5: Corner View, Archival Inkjet Print, 60 x 75 inches, 2018

Photography has long been described within the vocabulary of the psychoanalytic. The medium's diffusion into popular culture coincides with major developments in the field of

[7] Colomina, Beatriz. *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*. The MIT Press, 2001. pp. 80

psychoanalysis.[8] Walter Benjamin writes that "one first learns of the optical unconscious just as one learns of the drives of the unconscious through psychoanalysis."[9] Freud also views the conscious-unconscious relationship in photographic terms:

> Every mental process… exists to begin with in an unconscious stage or phase and it is only from there that the process passes over into the conscious phase, just as a photographic picture begins as a negative and only becomes a picture after being formed as a positive. Not every negative, however, necessarily becomes a positive; nor is it necessary that every unconscious mental process should turn into a conscious one.[10]

The simultaneous and interwoven arrival of psychoanalysis and photography helped establish a new sense of space, both architectural and psychological. Due to this relationship, the two provide a useful framework and vocabulary for interpreting these photographs, particularly *Corner View* and its direct troubling of space that blurs the boundaries of inside and out.

The interior of *Corner View* contains "interiority," or the psychic spaces of desire and anxiety." All photographs of interiors, especially ones devoid of people, explore this psychological space. The images suggest this by the relationship between the view visible through the windows, and the view reflected in the mirror. On the right side of the picture is a window frame that runs nearly the full length of the photograph's edge. It suggests an idyllic

---

[8] Ibid.

[9] Benjamin, W. "A Short History of Photography." *Screen*, vol. 13, no. 1, Jan. 1972, pp. 5–26., doi:10.1093/screen/13.1.5.

[10] Sigmund Freud, "General Theory of the Neuroses," The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, ed. And trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974, vol. 16, p. 295

location with its cyan blue gradient and pine tree branches. However, in reality the view reveals nothing. It is just a poor approximation of the idealism that is associated with the space.

What reveals the actual setting of the room is the indirect view only visible through the reflection in the mirror; a grey industrial lot. The reflection is empty of color, a stark contrast from what is expected when looking through the blue window. The flat, drab lighting revealed in the mirror conflicts with glowing light coming from the window on the left of the picture. Even though it is the same window reflected in the mirror it reveals what cannot be seen by looking directly.

Figure 6: Installation View #2, Visual Arts Center, University of Texas at Austin, 2019

I amplify elements of spatial confusion and transformation by producing the final images at a large scale that approximates its real-life counterparts. At sixty by seventy-five inches the prints create a bodily relation that allows the photograph to operate within the same framework

as painting. Shown borderless in thin white frames, the work takes on a sculptural presence. The viewer must now be conscious of their physical relationship to the hung pieces.

Preexisting Imagery

The *Dwelling* photographs are all made through a process of montaging together various preexisting commercial imagery. The source of those preexisting photographs was the archive of an unknown commercial photographer working on behalf of J.C. Penny. They were commissioned to photograph a variety of bedspreads, curtains, and other bedroom decorations for publication in the heavily distributed advertising catalog. I purchased and this archive in order to search for images suitable for reworking, ultimately creating something new through a mostly intuitive process.

Once selected, the negatives were scanned at a resolution that provided the capability of creating life size reproductions. Segments from the various scan files are arranged in a single Photoshop window; each selection carefully placed in relation to the overall group. Once arranged in a promising composition, I montage the layers into a single image with varying success the constructed image serves as a framework for me to respond to, selectively repeating this process until I deem the image is finished.

As mentioned, *Dwelling* is made from repurposed commercial imagery from 1970's J.C. Penny catalogs. I think of this process as a way to reimagine the source material. While the idea of the catalog itself is already loaded with cultural significance and symbolism, I have chosen to stay away from the catalog as a direct reference in the work. Instead, I have focused solely on representations of the bedroom. My images are constructed from the outtakes and alternate views and are different from the final, approved for advertising, photograph.

I place great significance on the imagery. For me, the importance of the source material is its relationship to mass, socially accepted ideologies and customs through its past use in retail marketing. Even though I am using imagery from the 1970's, many depicted traditions are still present. As I rework the images, I choose to leave visible seams, areas of transparency, and optical trickery as a way to acknowledge and question those cultural aspects. The use of dated imagery also provides a level of distance from the present, giving space for one to recognize contemporary issues through an examination of the past.

Photography exists in a space between authored image as art and as culture. Therefore, my ability to repurpose commercial photographs in service of the creation of art is a byproduct of the photographic medium itself. In an essay about German photographer Thomas Ruff, writer David Campony, described how modernist photography occupied the intersection of art, design, documentary, anthropology, sociology, politics, science, law, fashion, architecture applications. It exists in between the poles of useful and useless, expression and document.[11] Due to this intrinsic characteristic of photography, I am able to alter the function of images in order to repurpose the commercial image into the artistic one.

In the image *Corner Promenade,* I call attention to this characteristic while deepening my work's connection to art history. The photograph shows a close view of a corner of a bedroom. The frame is tight in on a wooden desk that appears to be dissolving into the wall behind it. The only indication that this scene unfolds in a bedroom is the bedpost that is visible along the left side of the frame. On top of the dissolving desk is a bouquet of flowers, several books, and a crystal-like rock. Behind the flowers are two hanging frames with illustrations displayed within

[11] Campony, David. *Thomas Ruff*. Edited by Iwona Blazwick, Whitechapel Gallery, 2017.

them. It is through the inclusion of these illustrations that a reference to art history, specifically to the artist Paul Cézanne.

The framed images are each reproductions of famous fashion imagery from the Parisian magazine *La Mode illustree.* The reproduction that is displayed in the left frame is *Color Plate 19* from the May 7th, 1871 issue[12]. That plate's imagery was appropriated and repainted by Cézanne. His painting *The Promenade, 1871* is nearly the same. He only made slight changes to color and several forms. Even with his edits, the source is clearly recognizable.

Figure 7: Corner Promenade, Archival Inkjet Print, 60 x 75 inches, 2019

[12] Dombrowski, André. "The Emperor's Last Clothes: Cézanne, Fashion and 'L'année Terrible'." The Burlington Magazine, vol. 148, no. 1242, 2006, pp. 586–594. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20074554.

The inclusion of *Color Plate 19* within my photograph makes my relationship to popular preexisting imagery explicit. It acknowledges the intent behind the reimaging of commercial photography, and reproducible imagery in the service of artmaking. The inclusion of *Color Plate 19* within my photograph makes my relationship to popular preexisting imagery explicit. It is meant to acknowledge the intent behind the reimagining of commercial photography and reproducible imagery in the service of artmaking. By making pictures from found photographs I am able to conjure up recognizable cultural memories that allow for an investigation of the present through a reexamination of the past.

Bibliography

Benjamin, W. “A Short History of Photography.” *Screen*, vol. 13, no. 1, Jan. 1972, pp. 5–26., doi:10.1093/screen/13.1.5.

Campony, David. *Thomas Ruff*. Edited by Iwona Blazwick, Whitechapel Gallery, 2017.

Colomina, Beatriz. *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*. The MIT Press, 2001.

Hobsbawm, E. J., and T. O. Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Rybczynski, Witold. *Home: a Short History of an Idea*. Pocket Books, 2001.

Teyssot, Georges, and Catherine Seavitt. “Boredom and Bedroom: The Suppression of the Habitual.” *Assemblage*, no. 30, 1996, p. 44., doi:10.2307/3171457.